I

Reflections on English History[1]

Tocqueville (5th October 1828)

. . . Well, here I am at Tocqueville, in my old family ruin. A league away is the harbour[2] from which William set out to conquer England. I am surrounded by Normans whose names figure in the lists of the conquerors. All that, I must admit, 'flatters the proud weakness of my heart', and sometimes stirs a childish enthusiasm of which afterwards I am ashamed. However all that brings me round to a subject I had quite forgotten about, and puts me in mind to write to you my musings about English history, which I must do much more shortly than I could wish as I have so little time here. I will write haphazard what I think for you to put in order if you can or will. But on my soul and conscience I warn you that I don't yet know what I am going to say.

I don't think you like the beginnings, and I can well believe it. I could never read about them without yawning, and could never remember the sequence of events narrated. But still I think that when I, as you too, studied the matter, had our reading been better directed, we might have found it interesting and the source of some pregnant thoughts. As for facts, I have given up all hope of remembering the names of the kings of the Heptarchy and all that muddle of obscure happenings whose cause and whose results no one knows. But I should like to get a clear picture of the movements of peoples spreading over on top of each other and getting continually mixed up, but each still keeping something that it had from the beginning. There is hardly

[1] Letter by Tocqueville, addressed very probably to his friend Gustave de Beaumont. The document is slightly cut in the beginning where Tocqueville reports on some intimate details of his private life which are irrelevant here. It is published here for the first time.

[2] Tocqueville refers to Barfleur.

anywhere better than England for studying the underlying factors and the details of the armed emigrations which overturned the Roman Empire, because there were more of them there and they lasted into a time when the barbarians in the rest of Europe were already refinding civilisation. But besides that there is something in the broad picture which strikes the imagination; revolution after revolution compared to which those of our own time are trifles: the driving back of the British tribes by the Scots: the Saxons coming and driving all before them: the battles of the Saxons against the Danes, a third race of conquerors still coming from the same part of the world, but keeping more of the savage energy of the Northern peoples; battles which lasted until the Normans, coming from the North, too, but endowed both with the impetuous energy of the Danes and with a higher civilisation than the Saxons, united them all under one yoke. One thinks with horror of the inconceivable sufferings of humanity at that time. Don't you think that an account which disregarded individuals and told of the march of peoples, a short, staccato account, would paint a terrible picture but one from which much could be learnt? But I'm a fool to let my imagination run. Back please. I was saying that one could find pregnant thoughts in the study of early English history. I must work that out more: It has always surprised me that so many sensible, thoughtful people should suppose that the feudal system in France originated from the troubles of the second race and the weakness of the third. That seems to me much as if a doctor should attribute a malignant fever of which one might be cured or die three months later, to the exhaustion of a day's hunting. I think just one observation is enough to destroy that theory. If the feudal system is due to chance in France, by what odd coincidence does it turn up again among the Germans, among the Poles where it still exists, among the Goths in Spain, and even in Italy, the Southern extremity of Europe? Clearly the feudal system of the twelfth century is but the result of an underlying cause. It sprang fully armed from the peoples of the North, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter, needing only the hatchet's blow. Do you see what I want to get at? This is it: if you want to understand the first underlying principles of the feudal system, and you need to understand them to see how the wheels work in the finished machine, you cannot do better than study the time

before the Norman conquest, because, as I said before, we know of no people nearer to their primitive state than the Saxons and the Danes. No other people show a clearer record of their institutions, and I am sure that deep research into those times would enable us to explain many things which cannot now be explained in the history of other peoples, as for instance certain maxims of legal procedure which have become laws throughout Europe, but of which we can neither trace the origin, nor account for the reason why people are so obstinately attached to them. Besides that, the customs of the Saxons are interesting in themselves and especially interesting in the context of English history. Their legal procedure is the oddest which has ever existed, and one can find in it all the elements of the present-day procedure, some parts of which we have adopted ourselves.

To conclude, I always come back to the view that the Saxons, coming later and farther from the ancient Roman hearth of civilisation, are precious as a type of the peoples from whom we all, such as we are, are sprung. Perhaps one could make something of that idea.

But I admit that that won't help you much at present. So let us go on to the history of England after the conquest. As I have no book of any sort in front of me, I am sure to make many mistakes about men, dates and sometimes even events, but at least I feel sure that I am right about the basic trends.

There were many reasons why William's conquest was both easy and lasting. The differences which still existed between the various races inhabiting the island, the size of the capital and the absence of all fortifications in the provinces, the vast intellectual superiority of the Normans at that time (a superiority which I cannot explain, but which surely existed), these are what facilitated the conquest. What made it last was the change in the ownership of land and the introduction of the fully developed feudal system. But be sure that if no notion of this had existed before, no power on earth could have established it at once in a form to last. However that may be, it was established and the system made a more coherent whole than in any other country, because one head had thought out all the machinery and so each wheel fitted better. I admire that creation of William and cannot resist stopping a moment to talk about it. There are two great drawbacks to avoid in organising a country. Either the whole

strength of social organisation is centred on one point, or it is spread over the country. Either alternative has its advantages and its drawbacks. If all is tied into one bundle, and the bundle gets undone, everything falls apart and there is no nation left. Where power is dispersed, action is clearly hindered, but there is strength everywhere. So it is safe to say that in the first case a people will do greater things and have a more active life than in the second case, but its life will be poorer. I don't know if a mean between these extremes can be found, but it would seem that William did find it. Wherever it was established these were the principles of the feudal system: the grant of land and of power of government in return for a money rent and, more important, the obligation to provide an armed force for a stated time. That is the whole point. It followed therefrom that the right to make extraordinary levies going beyond the original agreement required the consent of the parties concerned. So the King had no other armies but those of his barons, and no revenue but that from his domains. So then if the King was not the richest and by far the most powerful of the feudal lords, his kingship was but a name. That is what happened in France, where the barons went so far as to abolish the right of appeal to the king's courts. That is what did not happen in England. William, master of all, gave lavishly but kept still more. Power was so divided among the ruling class that a handful of Normans could hold down an unwilling country for a century, but the royal power was so strong that it could crush any individual baron who would have wished to break away from the king's general supervision, and could only be brought down by a general combination against him. So then if William's successors had been different from what they were, his work would surely have lasted as he had conceived it, and in spite of the revolutions which followed, his version of the feudal system is nevertheless by and large the one which caused the least harm and left the smallest legacy of hatred.

There have been few worse rulers and, especially, few rulers more inclined to abuse their powers than the Norman kings and the first Plantagenets. William Rufus was like a wild beast; Henry I ruled with ability but with a rod of iron; civil war came; the royal domain was squandered under Stephen, each faction plundering it for its private needs. But seldom has fortune

favoured anyone more than Henry II, the founder of the Plantagenets. In his own right Count of Anjou, Poitou and Maine, his marriage to Eleanor brought him Guyenne and Saintonge. So the whole Atlantic coast became English without a sword drawn. Henry II was a hard, autocratic ruler as were all the rest of his family. His son Richard, hero only of romance, was a wild madman; one of those brilliant beings who burn but give no light. His reign exhausted the royal domain. Money was raised by extortion; the poll-tax, a levy, often arbitrary, which the king and the barons exacted from people of the third estate and serfs, became exorbitant, and even the barons' property was subject to confiscation. The provinces won in France only made oppression worse, since each was used to rule the other and so the king was never short of obedient servants.

So you see, my dear friend, that if William's work did not produce the results we might have expected, the bad behaviour of his successors is alone to blame.

However that may be, when John came to the throne the English were in a bad way. The king's power, which for a century had been in the hands of tyrants, weighed heavily both on the barons and on the third estate which was beginning to emerge in Europe at that time and which the kings of France took trouble to encourage in their domains. The pressure must have been severe, for it was at that time that Philip-Augustus met hardly any resistance when he occupied the English provinces in France, even Normandy. John's tyranny grew no less through the loss of those provinces, for it is a law of all dominion, past, present and future, to make greater demands in proportion as power decreases. At last one fine morning, I think it was about the year 1206,[1] the leaders of the English barons realised that, if they united, they would be stronger than the king though each by himself was still weaker than he. John was surrounded and made to sign first Magna Carta and soon afterwards the Forest Charter.

Historians have a passion for decisive events. One must admit that they are very convenient. An event like that makes an excellent starting point; your purpose set once for all, you have only to give a straightforward, frank account of the ensuing

[1] The barons met in 1214 and swore to obtain from the king a confirmation of Henry I's charter. Magna Carta was actually signed in June 1215.

consequences. What could be better? But unfortunately this world's affairs do not always go like that. Many people treat the words 'Magna Carta' as magic. They see the whole English Constitution in it; the two Houses; ministerial responsibility; taxation by vote and a thousand other things that are no more there than in the Bible. Magna Carta served no national purpose, but was devised to serve the private interests of the nobles and to redress some intolerable abuses which harmed them. The few stipulations that affected the common people amount to so little that it is not worth talking about them. But unimportant though it was in some respects, Magna Carta nevertheless brought great things about. It was *decisive*: it gave a clear shape to the opposition. Everything was ready for change. From then onwards a great many men marched under the standard of the Great Charter without knowing or caring what it had enacted. There were more than thirty ratifications of that same charter imposed on kings in the century after it.

Generally any power challenged reacts by finding ways to support itself. So we see Edward I succeed to John.[1] Edward no doubt had just as despotic a disposition as any of his predecessors, but he was a skilful ruler who knew that one has to tack in a storm. He took the measures which are almost always successful after a revolution, when there are a great many private disasters and the first need is for personal safety. He brought back order and made good civil laws which, as you know, often make people forget good political laws. He was largely responsible for the organisation of English judicial procedure. Trade was encouraged. Finally he did all he could to soothe popular passion and succeeded pretty well. He reigned long, firmly and with fair renown. He was a bad man but able, which by and large is better for peoples than an honest but incapable ruler. In his reign began the war between England and Scotland in which later on France took a prominent part.

Nota Bene. This is what happens when one writes quickly without a book. Racking my memory I notice that I have left out a trifle, a reign of fifty years, that of Henry III.

Henry III was the son of John. He succeeded him after the French pretender, *Louis d'Outre Mer*, had been driven out. He was a good enough prince but a nonentity who let the revolution

[1] Henry III succeeded John in 1216 and Edward followed Henry III in 1272.

glide on. One of those people whom one has met since the thirteenth century, who give up important points and argue obstinately about small ones, thus annoying without giving in. Henry fell completely under the guardianship of the barons who were then led by a Frenchman, Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester. This time is remembered for the first occasion that the Commons were summoned to Parliament. That was the result of a general movement occurring over the whole of Europe. One must stop here and pay careful attention.

The barbarian invasions brought into existence only two classes of men; noble and serf. The progress of civilisation and the weakening of the feudal system soon allowed a third class to appear, but the seeds of this were half smothered by the other two. The 'Tiers Etat' or the commons come on the scene from the twelfth century in France and, I think, about the same time in England. They were composed of all the hard-working people of independent spirit who were put upon in every sort of way by the tyranny of barons and king. So communal organisations were formed in every town where there were enough people to put up some resistance. As time went on this class became, for that age, very enlightened and rich, as all commerce had gradually fallen into its hands. It gained what the others lost, for it was nearer than the others to the natural state of mankind. The capital was of little importance in feudal days, so it was possible that, at the same time as a baron, safe in his corner, struck money, held court and made war with his serfs and his liegemen, a bowshot away there might be a town, appointing its magistrates, managing its finances, and having its armed band under its own flag, in a word a real republic. And in such republics there were often heroes worthy to have lived in Rome or Sparta. Such was the state of Europe in the twelfth and more especially the thirteenth century. An odd mixture of oppression and liberty, one can see no unity in its variegated confusion, but everywhere centres of active life. Now, listen. Suppose that two men have been engaged in a long and determined fight although one of them is a little weaker than the other. A third man comes up, weaker than either of the two but who, whichever side he took, would be sure to tilt the balance that way. But who will think of asking him for help, who will urge his claim for help most strongly? It is sure to be he who feels himself weakest. When the two

weak ones join together, the strongest enemy will be defeated. But which of the two allies will have the upper hand? The fight begins again, and ends in full or partial victory for one of them. There, my dear friend, is the whole history of France and of England in the story of those three men, but with this difference that in France it was the king who was the weaker of the first pair and therefore the one to call the Commons to his aid, to join forces with them and lead them, to use their help to destroy the feudal system, and in the end to be swallowed up by them when the two were left face to face in 1789. In England, on the other hand, the feudal nobility started weaker of the two and so was the one to call the third estate to Parliament, year by year to put forward claims in its interest as if they were their own, to build up its strength, promote and sustain it every time. When the king's power was gone, it was the third estate which threw over the nobility in 1640 and established the republic. We will see how it came about that that revolution was not final. But you see that in every case the weakest becomes the strongest, and the ally gets his master down, which goes to show, as I said before, that after all rational equality is the only state natural to man, since nations get there from such various starting points and following such different roads.

So you see it is a crucial point for my argument that it was the barons, with Lord Leicester at their head, who summoned the Commons to Parliament to use as a prop against the royal power. Whereas in France it was Philip the Fair who summoned them to the States General. Others pretend that petty circumstances controlled these events, but I can only see them as the necessary consequence of the state of affairs. The third estate had to be called in to the management of affairs as soon as anything was to be feared or hoped from it. That's the natural way for the world to go.

This innovation was revolutionary. Leicester killed and his faction destroyed, it was some years before there was talk of the Commons again. It was Edward I, of whom I spoke before out of turn, who summoned them in legal form. That prince who, as I said, knew that one had to tack in the storm, saw all the advantage that he could draw from the Commons, if he chose who should represent them and united them under his control. Besides the great feudal maxim 'do not tax the un-

willing' was then in full force. Edward needed money; the Commons were rich; the barons would not have allowed them to be trampled on in contravention of accepted principles. So once more the short answer was to bring them together on his side by means of their representatives. So from then onwards Parliament was constituted more or less as it is today, though it was not very like Mr. Canning's Parliament. Here I may be able to help you by explaining how that Parliament is formed, a matter which has always bothered me and which I think I now understand properly.

All the 'freeholders' that is to say, if I am not mistaken, all those in the feudal hierarchy who held direct from the king—and there were a great many of them—had the right to appear in Parliament. I don't know where that law was written, nor indeed if it was written at all, but it sprang from the very nature of the feudal system, since one needed the consent of all that lot of people to do a heap of things, among others the imposition of all extraordinary taxes. At the time of the conquest many of them found this right a burden. In fact the freeholds were very far from equal. There might be a baron holding direct and in that sense the equal of the leaders of the English nobility, whose modest property made him in fact their inferior and who had a sorry part to play in Parliament which only involved him in unwanted expense. This situation was made a great deal worse as time went on and properties were divided up. Then next it was found necessary to impose fines to compel the lesser lords to come to Parliament as with us to jury service. Finally, their numbers multiplying as their patrimonies diminished, after persistent requests they were permitted only to send 'representatives' to appear for them. Follow all this carefully, please. So Parliament came to be composed of two different sorts of men, the leaders of the higher nobility or the lords, and the representatives of the inferior nobility or 'gentry'. First of all, these two sorts of men claimed equal status, but soon the hereditary members came to be accepted as more important than the elected ones and little by little the Lords shut the representatives of the gentry or the counties out from the management of affairs. It was then that the Commons became strong enough and rich enough for others to have an interest in summoning them to Parliament. They, too, sent representatives to appear for them

under the name of deputies for the boroughs. At first this new element in Parliament was deeply distrusted by the other two. They sat separately, only voted taxes, and when they tried to play a part in government, the lords and the representatives of the counties roughly repulsed them. The borough members themselves feeling their own inferiority often said that questions of government did not concern them at all. We will soon see how all that changed in time. All you need to know for the moment is that as the borough members gained in importance, those for the counties lost theirs. Finally the two classes of men found themselves on a level and then formed what was afterwards called the English House of Commons. Now that explains our neighbours' complicated electoral system and gives you the key to it. Each county elects two members. Those members represent the lower nobility, or, if you like it better, the landed interest. There is a fairly high property qualification for the electors and a higher one for the elected. That is the principle of a French election. For the boroughs it is quite a different matter. Every borough has been granted by some old charter the right to send one or more members to Parliament; it can choose them as it likes, that is its affair. So the form of election varies from place to place. Many towns, not knowing where to draw the line, summoned all the inhabitants. Hence the 'hustings'; shouting speakers, stones and fisticuffs and all the orgies we witness of English liberty. I think you understand now how Parliament is formed. Back to the main theme; I can't give you dates but will try not to lose the thread again. I forgot to speak of the clergy. For reasons easy to discover but which are questions of general history, the Catholic clergy throughout Europe had become both a religious and a political body. Almost all the bishops and many abbots held fiefs on the same terms as the barons, subject to military service and feudal dues. Like them they took their places as of right in Parliament. The clergy also met separately to raise its own taxes. After the Reformation these meetings, which had already become very infrequent, ceased altogether, and only the more important bishops kept their seats in the House of Lords.

There then is Parliament in being. It is composed of turbulent Lords and weak and timid Commons, themselves surprised at the part they have been called on to play. Nothing made the

summoning of Parliament obligatory, so a skilful king would take pride in getting on without it as long as possible. But that did not often happen, since Parliament on its side was careful only to vote taxes for a short period. When the king wanted to summon it, he dispatched 'Writs' to the counties and boroughs, which both ordered the election and generally named the candidate. That was a strange form of election. Yet, once together these same men were almost always brave opponents, so great is the strength of assemblies. Besides, once Parliament had come together, the Lords almost always spurred the Commons on and backed them up every time, which helped considerably to unite these two orders of men who, in the rest of Europe, have been irreconcilable enemies, and which soon encouraged the Commons to go their own way, relying on their own strength.

The Commons' first step was to declare that no tax could be levied on them unless it had been agreed by *them*. Before that a tax thrown out by the Commons, could be passed by the Lords, and then became binding on all. Lords and clergy joined with the Commons to gain this point. Each thought that the principle would be good for its own order. Once in control of taxation it was plain that the Commons would soon infiltrate into all branches of government. That is what happened, but it happened slowly on account of the jealousy of the Lords about this and the lack of grasp of general principles at that time.

It was through the right of petition that the Commons gradually gained ground. The king asked for a tax; the Commons put the bill on the Speaker's table and in their turn asked to have grievances redressed which affected them *particularly*. Sometimes the king agreed, but often he was annoyed, ordered the Commons to pass the bill, and even imprisoned some who opposed him. These measures were long successful and were never entirely given up; but they became continually less effective and at last several times the Commons bluntly declared that they would not vote a tax until their wrongs had been righted, and it was done.

I have just been looking over your letters again, my dear friend; your ostensible epistle is very funny. There is every thing needed there and nothing unnecessary. My brother and I laughed to tears over it. I am going to show it and think that it will produce its full effect. As for your second letter where you

complain of living with so much friendship and so pleasantly, here is the answer to it; I hope that this in-folio will plead my cause better than any discourse. Back to business.

I was saying that from the moment when the Commons were legally summoned to Parliament, that is to say under Edward I, they steadily gained in power and importance; and going on to the period when the wars of the Roses began, we will find them mixed up with all the operations of government, only granting subsidies when they knew how they would be used, addressing fiery speeches to the king, and bringing accusations against the ministers. That certainly fits together into an established system. Extreme liberty jostled with extreme oppression, and one side or the other would often adopt measures that cannot be reconciled with the spirit of a monarchy; but one must put the blame for that on the ignorance of the times, and the absence of definite limits mutually accepted by all the parties. Particular circumstances played, and had to play, an important part. However, one must admit that there is much to admire in the English people at that time. Their *constitution* was famous already and was thought to be different from that of other countries. Nowhere else in Europe as yet was there a better organised system of free government. No other country had profited so much from feudal organisation. I have stopped here and I point that out, because I believe it is the dividing line between two very distinct epochs. Now I will carry you on to the next epoch, following up events. Again please forgive anachronisms.

About the year 1300[1] Edward II succeeded Edward I. Edward married the daughter of Philip the Fair, king of France. Few beings have ever brought so much ill to the human race. She threw England into confusion and had her husband assassinated; she brought the Plantagenets what they afterwards called their 'cross' to the Crown of France and so started that war of more than a hundred years which is believed to have cost humanity eighteen million lives. Edward III, one of the greatest of England's kings, sat on his father's throne much as Alexander after the death of Philip, that is to say without clear proof that he had no part in the assassination.

At this same time France gave a fine example to the world. While the house of Plantagenet showed what terrible crimes am-

[1] It was in 1307.

bition will lead men to commit, the descendants of Hugh Capet showed exemplary and astonishing moderation. The last son of Philip the Fair at his death left his wife pregnant; Philip of Valois showed his respect for the principle of legitimacy even in this embryo king. The States General appointed him Regent; the Queen being brought to bed of a son, he had him recognised and was himself the first to do so. The baby died soon afterwards, but the loyalty of the Valois was so well known that no one in that age of violence suspected that he had met a violent end. The great question of the salic law then arose. Philip was the only male representative of the house of Capet, but Edward III had a closer blood relationship. The nation was assembled and the French prince declared King by acclamation and the sequel showed that the acclamation was no futile shout.

Then began the most heroic, the most brilliant and the most unhappy time in our history. Such, dear friend, was the first history book that fell into my hands, and I cannot convey the impression it made on me; every event is engraved on my memory, and thence derives that often unreflecting instinct of hate which rouses me against the English. Time and time again when I came to those disastrous battles in which valour was always crushed by superior discipline, I have skipped the pages and left out whole passages to which nonetheless irresistible curiosity would later drive me intermittently back. But forgive me, I am running off talking about myself which is not the subject in hand.

The energy shown by the English people in going off to conquer France proves two things: the sovereign's ability and the unity of the different sections of the nation when their common interests were at stake, which in its turn shows that by that time the constitution was already strong and stable. Edward III was clever at adapting means to end, but he had not the ability to conceive a comprehensive plan. He was one of those men of the second rank who perform great deeds, but do not achieve great things. I don't know if you understand me, but have not the time to develop my thought. He attacked Wales at the same time as France. In France he waged a war of devastation, he who wanted to rule there. He divided his forces. But his troops were excellent, his courage stood any test, and his son was the Black Prince, the hero of that brilliant century. He defeated

Philip of Valois at Crécy, and at Poitiers the Black Prince defeated King John and took him prisoner. Almost the whole of the French nobility fell into the power of the English in those two days. The French commons and serfs who had nursed an implacable hatred against that order, took this chance to seize power. A most terrible civil war was added to that against the foreigner. The English were before Paris. Finally it looked as if everything would fall to bits when Charles V took up the reins of power and Duguesclin the command of the armies. Never was there better proof that no blind force directs this world, but incapacity or wisdom. In less than ten years all the possessions, surrendered at the shameful treaty of Bretigny, had been taken from the English. It is true that the Black Prince was dead and that the stirring of the whole nation to turn the foreigner out of France wonderfully abetted the skill of king and general.

Perhaps you will ask me what I think constituted the superiority of the English troops over our own in those unhappy wars. This is it: Geographical position and freedom had already made England the richest country in Europe. Throughout the war Parliament put her wealth at the king's disposal. By this means Edward was able to maintain a paid army, that is to say an army of men who had to obey all his orders, which he could keep in being as long as he wanted and use as he wanted. Whereas the French king, not so provided, had to put the great feudal machine in motion. The barons were only bound to give forty days' service, they were on an equality between each other and would obey the king only; chance alone decided which men they assembled, so that they were but an impetuous ill-disciplined mass. You will see the picture when I say that the battle of Crécy was started without an order. Every one wanted to put his own standard on the same line; thus they advanced so close to the English that finally blind courage seized the crowd and they charged head down without any order of battle against a prepared enemy whom it was not intended to attack until the next day. It was only when bitter sufferings had taught the nobility to obey, when the people had been toughened by all manner of affliction, and above all when the money provided by the States General had enabled Charles V to buy the courage of plenty of brave and disciplined adventurers, that the odds became

even and the English quitted France leaving nothing but their bones behind.

At one moment Edward III was the arbiter of Europe, but, like almost all men, he could not die at the right moment. Like Louis XIV he outlived his glory and his family, only leaving as his heir his grandson, the unlucky Richard II.

Richard was received with wild delight when he came to the throne. All hearts rejoiced at the glorious memory of his father, the Black Prince. His minority was stormy. When he was old enough to take personal charge of affairs, he thought of the turbulence of the Commons, of the insolence of the Lords; he decided at once, or perhaps was led on little by little, to try to destroy that dangerous constitution, as yet ill defined, which made the strength of skilful princes, but which threw the unskilful from the throne. The manner in which he set about this deserves your full attention. There are few more instructive pages in history. He reassembled Parliament and, before dissolving it, made it choose from its body commissioners to represent it when it was not assembled, just as Parliament itself represented the nation. He had the same powers granted to this restricted assembly as the whole of Parliament enjoyed. That done, one can see that he could easily dominate this small group of men put under his hand. National representation was then only a name. Richard ruled without control. All went well for some time. Perfect calm seemed to reign over England; hearts seemed benumbed and no doubt there were young people at that time who wondered anxiously whether they had not been born into an age of soft lethargy that had succeeded the age of marvels. They soon had a chance to change their minds. Richard wanted to do the very thing that was most contrary to the spirit of feudal constitutions and to that of England in particular, to raise a tax which had not been voted. It was paid, but proved the drop of water which makes a glass overflow. While the king complacently contemplated his power, his cousin Henry of Lancaster landed with a few friends on the English coast and raised the standard of revolt. In a few days a hundred thousand men were following his banner. The king was captured without a fight. One night terrible cries were heard in the castle of Pontefract where he had been imprisoned, and the next day he was found assassinated. A parliament had already declared him

deposed from the throne and had put Lancaster in his place under the name of Henry IV.

As I think about all this, my dear friend, and about the fearful consequences of these events, I feel that the history of this time should be written in huge letters in all public places and in the palaces of all kings. Perhaps the peoples would realise what it costs to sacrifice the principle of legitimacy, and doubtless their rulers too would learn that one cannot make sport of the rights of nations unpunished, and that triumphs of that sort do not always last long.

All seemed to go well for the usurper. Henry IV was an able man. Moreover he was chosen by the people. He kept his position, although with some difficulty, and his son's renown seemed to make the fortunes of his family certain.

That son was Henry V whom the English regard as the hero of their history. Henry V made use of the best means of distracting the restless energy of a people still shaken by the after-effects of a revolution; he decided to break the truce with France and profit from the internal disturbances which were again rending our unhappy country. Charles V and Duguesclin were dead. The Burgundians and the Armagnacs were quarrelling for power. Henry V landed in Normandy, won the decisive battle of Agincourt, marched on Paris, was received by one faction, had himself crowned king of France and recognised as such by a Parliament. In appearance every one submitted. But Henry died at the height of his fame at the castle of Vincennes. Soon after that comes the incredible story of Joan of Arc, which one cannot understand but can still less question. The English, attacked on all sides, began to retreat and for the second and last time France was saved.

When Henry V was dead,[1] a few years after 1400, the most savage civil war which has ever stained the annals of a country broke out in England. It is known as the Wars of the Roses, and was due to the ambitions of the houses of York and Lancaster who fought for the throne through fifty years of unparalleled bitterness. I will not go into the details of that bloodstained time; it would be pointless and besides the shifts of fortune were so sudden that I could hardly follow the thread. The only man whose figure stands out imposing amidst the horrors of the

[1] He died in 1422.

time is Warwick who, ever changing from one side to the other, always brought victory with him, and smashed the work of his hands as easily as he had set it up. All the others are just frightful criminals whose only merit is the one common in times of troubles, to know how to die. One could make a terrible picture of this time in English history, a picture that would make the hairs of the staunchest stand on end. But Lingard[1] is at his most phlegmatic on these occasions. It is enough for you to know that during these civil wars each party triumphed in turn more than ten times, and each time the vanquished suffered all manner of punishments and confiscations. Eighty princes and lords of the Royal House met a violent death, land changed hands quickly, and finally that scourge of God, like a great fire, stopped only when it could find no more to burn. The whole tyrannical and cruel race of the Plantagenets vanished from this world. Surely without being superstitious one can see in that something like the finger of God. Henry Tudor, Duke of Richmond, who was descended through his mother from the house of Lancaster, married the heiress of the house of York and finally occupied in peace the place made vacant by the family whose children had thus devoured one another.

There are many people, both among those who have studied English history and those who have not, who suppose that the English constitution has passed through various regular, successive stages until it has reached the point where it now is. According to them it is a fruit which every age has helped to ripen. That is not my view and I shall be very surprised if it is yours when you have read all English history carefully. No doubt you will agree with me that there comes a moment when the forward movement is not only stopped but gives way to a most marked retrogression. That is the time to which we have now come. I stopped in 'the history of the constitution' at the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses. I pointed out that at that period the English constitution formed a complete whole, that all free tendencies had been developed and that those anomalies which still existed had their roots in particular

[1] Here Tocqueville refers to his source in spite of the fact that he had claimed previously to write without referring to books. Cf. *Abrégé de l'histoire d'Angleterre de John Lingard* (Paris 1827). On Lingard see the valuable study by Th. L. Coonan in *Some Modern Historians of Britain*, Essays in honour of R. L. Schuyler, New York, 1951, pp. 1 ff.

causes. During the civil wars Parliament was merely an instrument of factions. On the arrival of the Tudors one sees something like a general agreement by all orders in the state to throw themselves into servitude. A word about this strange tendency of their minds. If a wise man had looked at England after the extinction of the Plantagenets, he would have been surprised at the incredible changes which had come about in less than fifty years. The nobility seemed reduced almost to nothing, almost all the descendants of the Normans were dead or ruined, and new unstable families without roots in the nation had risen in their place. The members of the Commons, deprived of the support of the Lords which they had never lacked when it was a question of restraining the royal power, and not feeling themselves strong enough yet to act by themselves and for themselves, had lost all that republican energy which had marked their fathers. The spirit of both these orders was bruised and bent by the series of private and public disasters. They only hoped that what they lost in freedom, they had gained in security. Add that a similar movement was taking place all over Europe. At that time all monarchies were tending to become absolute. One man's standard replaced the oligarchic liberty which had been enjoyed for two centuries. This was the first fruit of the civilisation which had made men more vividly aware of the vices of the feudal system, and led all the peoples to throw themselves, bound hand and foot, into the power of their rulers to correct its defects.

This movement was more marked in England than anywhere else. Special reasons gave it peculiar strength. Nowhere in Europe was despotism more terrible, because nowhere else was it more 'legal'. Note that well; nothing gives more food for thought. When a despot forces his way to sovereignty, his power, however great, will have limits, be they only those imposed by *fear*. But a sovereign clothed in power to do everything in the name of law is far more to be feared and fears nothing. So when one of the Tudors asked the people for an exorbitant tax, it was the people themselves who granted it, for Parliament had voted it; when the blood of the highest fell on the scaffold, who was responsible? The sentence was signed by the hand of all the Lords. Thus its own instrument was turned against liberty. So in England obedience to a master soon took on that

servile air which is characteristic of all states once free but no longer so, so different from France where the subject will give money or life to his prince while seeming to act entirely from his own free will. My dear friend, I have often wanted to clap my hands at seeing these English so proud today of their independence, so free from the old prejudices of the continent, to see these same English bow their heads beneath a yoke ten times more humiliating than any other, to hear the humble language of the Commons and axioms of despotism on every mouth, to think of those rotten Parliaments which never refused a man's life to the king's will and ended under Henry VIII by condemning men unheard. That is what are called 'Bills of Attainder', a diabolical invention which even the Tribunal of the Revolution never revived. Finally, my dear friend, when I see the English people change their religion four times to please their masters, and when I think that almost in our own day we have seen the French clergy nearly in mass prefer exile, poverty and death to the mere appearance of a schism, when I see that, I am prouder to be born on this side of the channel than I should be to claim that the blood of Plantagenets and Tudors ran in my veins.

I don't know who can see in this time an advance towards the Revolution of 1688. But what was able to raise the English people from that state of degradation? The same thing as had thrown them down. The spirit of the constitution had been broken, but the forms remained: it was like the corpse of a free government. When spirits stupefied by the disasters of the civil wars began little by little to revive, when numbed hearts beat again, when the passage of time had given the Commons the strength they lacked or thought they lacked, in a word, when the nation awoke, it found the tools for regeneration to hand, and with the spirit of its ancestors all the means to be like them. Attention was naturally drawn to and fixed on something which had happened before, a circumstance which is a wonderful help to popular movements.

The Tudors reigned for about a hundred years. The founder of the family who took the name of Henry VII was of a hard, despotic temperament, but as a new arrival he was still held within some limits. I know of no more complete tyrant in history than his son Henry VIII. He has given us his own picture on his death-bed, when he said that he had never been able to refuse a

woman's honour to his passions, or a man's life to his anger. A prop of Catholicism then under attack, for its unity appealed to his love of dominion, he soon became its bitterest enemy because the Pope would not let him marry his mistress whom, by the by, he later had beheaded. But the instincts of a tyrant warned him that sooner or later the new theories of the reformers would lead on to republican ideas. So he struck on the strange idea of preserving the doctrines, beliefs and hierarchy of the Roman Church, and only taking away its head. He was the English Pope. The strange events that follow paint a sad picture of the human species. Should a man in renouncing obedience to the Pope also deviate from the principles of Catholicism, he was burnt in grand style, for that was the church's punishment for heretics. But should another combine obedience to the Pope with the same Catholic doctrines, they slashed his stomach open good and proper to snatch out his heart and beat his cheeks with it, for that was a man who had refused the king one of his rights, he was guilty of high treason and should suffer the death of traitors. Poor humanity! That shows you at once the overweening power of the Tudors. You will easily understand that the mass of the people could not come to terms with this political religion, a halfway house which pleased no one entirely. However that religion established itself and its domestic forms have lasted till our day.

After Henry VIII comes Edward VI of whom one can say nothing, as he died too young and his ministers were solely responsible for what happened under him. He established the reformed religion in almost all respects.

His reign delightfully proves how men need *authority* in questions of religion, and how far they go astray when they lose a sure basis and appeal to their reason alone. One finds them then discussing various questions of belief as if they were so many paragraphs in a Bill, and a simple majority would decide what was or was not so in spiritual matters, determining what one must believe or answer to be saved in the next world and not to be hanged in this.

Mary arrives and the scene changes. Catholicism raises its head in the most intolerant guise it has ever shown. The Queen was Catholic. Parliament declared that any other religion was false and decreed penalties against dissidents. One hung under

Edward, one burnt under Mary. Then as before the masses submitted. If there was any popular agitation it was suppressed at once.

Mary died. Her sister Elizabeth re-established the religion of Henry VIII and Parliament imposed the death penalty on anyone who resisted that belief.

Elizabeth's rule was arbitrary but glorious. Commerce increased, but commercial activity was the prelude to a more dangerous development. When the Tudor dynasty came to an end, the huge edifice of tyranny which they had built up still seemed to be standing, but it had lost its foundations in the hearts of Englishmen. The spirit of argument introduced by the Reformation began to bear fruit: the Commons already began proudly to take thought of their power and their wealth. The revolution was silently ripening under the protection of despotism itself. Just at that moment a new family came to the throne impregnated with all the old traditions of the former ruling house, but coming to reign over a people where everything had changed. Never had there been greater pretensions to absolute power than just at that moment when the foundations on which it rested were going to collapse.

I stop here. The age of the Stuarts would need another letter all to itself. This one which I have written by fits and starts is sure to be an indigestible muddle. I do not know about that and probably never shall know, as I must leave you now without re-reading it. So please forgive the anachronisms, the mistakes in French, and the mistakes in spelling too which are sure to be numerous; forgive me too for the professorial manner which I think I have put on sometimes.

I leave here on the 15th; I shall be in Paris on the 17th. Be a good chap and come and see me on the 18th before one o'clock or for dinner, which would be much better. Unless you do that, I shall think you are cross with me for being so slow in writing to you. That reminds me that my letter will arrive like mustard after dinner. What of it? Nothing comes at the right moment in this world!

Good-bye then, Sir and dear future collaborator, I am burning to escape to your cloister. Meanwhile I embrace you with all my heart.